



# Australian Bureau of Statistics

## 1301.0 - Year Book Australia, 1909

ARCHIVED ISSUE Released at 11:30 AM (CANBERRA TIME) 01/01/1908

*This page was updated on 22 Nov 2012 to include the disclaimer below. No other content in this article was affected.*

### **DISCLAIMER:**

*Users are warned that historic issues of this publication may contain language or views which, reflecting the authors' attitudes or that of the period in which the item was written, may be considered to be inappropriate or offensive today.*

## THE FEDERAL MOVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

**1. Early Stages of the Federal Movement.**<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding that the early tendencies of Australia were those of a separate evolution of isolated settlements, attempts were made to bring about some measure of intercolonial reciprocity. Partly through the attitude of the Colonial Office, and partly through the want of sympathy that had already risen as between one colony and another, these attempts at first came to nought. Governor Fitzroy in a despatch dated as early as 29th September, 1846, realised the desirableness of considering the interests of the Australian colonies in their generality. Earl Grey's still more notable despatch of 31st July, 1847, recognised that there are questions which affected "Australia collectively, the regulation of which, in some uniform manner and by some single authority, may be essential to the welfare of them all," and "a central legislative authority for the whole of the Australian colonies" was actually contemplated. The "apprehension and dismay" which was then expressed, retarded, however, the issue. In 1849, a Committee of the Privy Council recommended, in addition to a uniform tariff, that one of the Governors should be constituted "Governor-General of Australia," and be authorised to convene a "General Assembly of Australia," to consist of a single House of from 20 to 30 delegates. Sir Charles Fitzroy was actually appointed "Governor-General of all Her Majesty's Australian Possessions"; and thus the Governor of New South Wales was constituted a sort of advisory over-lord of Australia, a distinction which, however, was practically but nominal, and which soon ceased (1861). In 1853, Wentworth's Constitutional Committee indicated the need for "the establishment at once of a General Assembly," but a really national unity for Australia was not contemplated. Dr. Lang's idea of a "great federation of all the colonies of Australia," propounded in 1852, was ridiculed by Wentworth. A Victorian committee in 1853 reiterated the desirableness of a "General Assembly."

In 1854, in the **Sydney Morning Herald**, "John Adams" (Revd. John West), urged the need of union, and in 1857 a memorial by Wentworth to the Secretary of State for the Colonies emphasised the need of a "Federal Assembly," which, it was suggested, should be perambulatory. An "Enabling Bill," drafted to empower two or more Legislatures to create the Assembly, met, however, with a discouraging reception; Her Majesty's Government would not promote the object of the memorialists. This Bill, though it provided for equal representation on the preliminary Convention, did not bind that Convention to the principle of equal representation in the Federal Assembly. In January, 1857, Mr. (afterwards Sir) Charles Gavan Duffy, brought about the appointment of a "Select Committee" of the Legislative Assembly of Victoria, "to inquire into and report upon the necessity of a federal union of the Australasian Colonies." etc., with the result that the ultimate necessity of a federal union was unanimously affirmed, most believing that the time for union had actually arrived.

In August of the same year, a Select Committee of the Legislative Council of New South Wales was appointed to consider and report upon the expediency of establishing a Federal Legislature," etc. It was pointed out that Imperial legislation was necessary, and that the matter could not be postponed without the danger of creating serious antagonism and jealousy. When it seems to have been in a fair way to have realised union, the advent of the Cowper administration in New South Wales, with Mr. (afterwards Sir) James Martin as the dominating personality of the Cabinet, blotted out the hope, since neither Mr. Cowper nor Mr. Martin cared for the federal ideal. South Australia in the same year, and Queensland in the year 1859, were still less favourable to the federal scheme. In 1860, Mr. Duffy's attempt to bring about a Conference on Federal Union failed also.

Though Federation proved unattainable, the differences in the tariffs enforced political attention. On the adoption of the 1855 Tariff of New South Wales, trade across the Murray River became free (1st November, 1855). In 1862, the Colonial Secretary of South Australia having opened up a correspondence with the other colonies on the question of a uniform tariff, Mr. Duffy again tried to bring about a consideration of the larger question of Australian Federation, the resulting conference meeting in Melbourne in March, 1863. Intercolonial Conferences were resorted to between 1863 and 1880 to secure such uniform legislation and concerted administration as appeared desirable. At one of these (March, 1867), Mr. (afterwards Sir) Henry Parkes came into prominent notice as an advocate of Federation, expressing himself in the following terms : - "...The time has arrived when these colonies should be united by some federal bond .... There are questions projecting themselves ... which cannot be dealt with by ... individual Governments. ... I believe it will lead to a permanent federal understanding." A Bill passed was, however, shelved by the Home Government.

**2. The Federal Council.** - A distinct stage in the progress toward Federation was marked by the Conference of November and December, 1880, and January, 1881. It was affirmed, *inter alia*, that the time had arrived when a Federal Council should be created to deal with intercolonial matters, but in submitting the Bill for the creation of this council, it was affirmed that "the time is not come for the construction of a Federal Constitution; with an Australian Federal Parliament." Nothing practical, however, was done; in fact, till 1883 every proposal for either complete or partial federation wholly failed. At a banquet at Albury, to signalise the junctioning of the railway systems of New South Wales and Victoria, Mr. James Service said: - "We want federation, and we want it now." But internal necessity was apparently not strong enough to crystallise federation into an actuality, until the external need was brought home to all the colonies by increased activity of foreign powers in the Pacific. The weakness of independent colonies was shewn by the situation which arose through Sir Thomas Mcllwraith's action in taking possession of New Guinea. This action was not endorsed by the Home Government, and it was manifest that effective representation to that Government was well-nigh impossible for individual and unfederated colonies. On 28th November, 1883, a "Convention" met in Sydney, at which the seven colonies and Fiji were all represented. Mr. Service had in view the establishment of a really federal Government, but the Bill drafted was a "Bill to establish only a Federal Council of Australasia." In July and August, 1884, the Legislatures of Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland, Western Australia, and Fiji addressed the Crown, praying for the enactment of the Federal Council Bill. New South Wales and New Zealand held aloof. Sir Henry Parkes regarded such a council as likely to "impede the way for a sure and solid Federation ."

The Bill, however, was introduced in the House of Lords on 23rd April, 1885, by the Earl of Derby, in response to the desires of the "Convention," and gave any colony power to secede from the council. It became law on 14th August, 1885, and was known as the "Federal Council of Australasia Act, 1885." The career of this council shewed that it could not hope to be effective, and it met for the last time in January, 1899.

**3. Formative Stages of the Federal Movement.** - Although the lot of Australia has happily been,

thus far, peaceful, events as far back as 1878 brought a consciousness of the need for federal defence into prominence, and arrangements were entered into with the Imperial Government for a scheme of naval protection. This was ratified by the Australasian Naval Force Acts, Queensland being the last to come into line, viz., in 1891. Early in 1889 Sir Henry Parkes had confidentially suggested to Mr. Duncan Gillies the necessity for a Federal Parliament and Executive. Unable to accept the latter's suggestion that New South Wales should give its adhesion to the Federal Council, the former statesman urged the institution of "a National Convention for the purpose of devising and reporting upon an adequate scheme of Federal Government." This led to the Melbourne Conference of 6th February, 1890. It was at the banquet on this occasion that, in proposing "A United Australasia," Mr. James Service pointed out that the tariff question was "a lion in the path," which federationists must either slay, or by which they must be slain; in the reply to which Sir Henry Parkes made use of his historic phrase, "the crimson thread of kinship runs through us all." Certain elements of doubt being expressed as to the motives underlying the movement, Sir Henry Parkes said : - "We desire to enter upon this work of Federation without making any condition to the advantage of ourselves, without any stipulation whatever, with a perfect preparedness to leave the proposed convention free to devise its own scheme, and, if a central Parliament comes into existence, with a perfect reliance upon its justice, upon its wisdom and upon its honour ... I think ... an overwhelming majority of my countrymen ... will approve of the grand step ... of uniting all the colonies under one form of beneficent government, and under one national flag."

The first National Australasian Convention, under the presidency of Sir Henry Parkes, was convened on 2nd March, 1891, all the colonies being represented, and also New Zealand. A Bill was drafted dealing comprehensively with the whole issue, giving federationists a definite plan of action, and anti-federationists a definite indication for attack. The draft Bill was considered by the Parliaments of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania, but not by those of Queensland, Western Australia, and New Zealand, and, in short, the parliamentary process of dealing with the matter may be said to have entirely failed. Federal sentiment, however, was strengthening. The collapse of the "land boom" had made apparent how intimately the interests of each colony are related; the dangers of disunion became more obvious. The Australian Natives' Association took up the federal cause with enthusiasm, Federation leagues were established, and the issues were intelligently and widely discussed. The late Sir George Dibbs' unification scheme helped to make the issue a real one. At the Conference of Premiers, which met at Hobart on 29th January, 1895, it was agreed that federation "was the great and pressing question of Australian politics," and that "the framing of a Federal Constitution" was an urgent duty. The resuscitation of the whole matter led to the passing of Enabling Acts. In New South Wales this received the Royal assent on 23rd December, 1895; South Australia anticipated this by three days; the Tasmanian Bill was passed on 10th January, 1896, the Victorian on 7th March, 1896; Western Australia fell into line on 27th October. The "People's Federal Convention," held at Bathurst, N.S.W., in November, 1896, gave a considerable impulse to the movement; to wait longer for Queensland was considered unnecessary, and the 4th March, 1897, was fixed as the date for the election of federal representatives for New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania. Western Australia soon followed suit, and on 22nd March the representatives met at Adelaide. In the discussions it was evident that the federal progress in the point of view had been considerable. Constitutional, Finance, and Judiciary Committees were appointed, and a Bill drafted. This was reported to the Convention on 22nd April and adopted on the following day, the Convention adjourning till the 2nd September following. The Parliaments of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, and Western Australia discussed the question before the Sydney Session of the Convention, opened on the 2nd September, 1897. The business of the Convention involved the general reconsideration of the whole Bill, and the consideration of no less than 286 suggested amendments. The work was of great value, as it gave a definitive character to that of the Melbourne Session of 1898, extending from 20th January to 17th March. This particular session of the Federal Convention was of all the most important, and the necessity of reaching a final decision gave to its deliberations corresponding weight. After an interval of 11 weeks, a popular vote was taken in four colonies. viz., New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, and South Australia.

Western Australia took no action, and Queensland stood aloof. The vote was as follows:-

	New South Wales.	Victoria.	South Australia.	Tasmania.	Totals.
For Federation as drafted	71,595	100,520	35,800	11,797	219,712
Against "	66,228	22,099	17,320	2,716	108,363
Majority	5,367	78,421	18,480	9,081	111,349

This majority in New South Wales being legally insufficient, the following day the Premier (Rt. Hon. G. H. Reid, P.C.) telegraphed to the other Premiers, inviting them to meet in conference with a view of amending the Bill. Queensland fell in with the suggestion. On 22nd January, 1899, the Premiers of the six colonies met at Melbourne, and as a result seven amendments were made in the Bill. This step was virtually the solvent of the few outstanding difficulties which could in any way be regarded as fundamental.

**4. Adoption and Enactment to the Constitution.** - After the necessary preliminaries. the 20th June, 1899, was the day fixed for the second referendum, the results on that day being :-

	New South Wales.	Victoria.	South Australia.	Tasmania.	Queensland	Totals.
For Federation	107,420	152,653	65,990	13,437	38,488	377,988
Against "	82,741	9,805	17,053	791	30,996	141,386
Majority	24,679	142,848	48,937	12,646	7,492	236,602

"Never before," say Sir John Quick and Mr. Garran, "have a group of self-governing, practically independent communities, without external pressure or foreign complications of any kind, deliberately chosen of their own free will to put aside their provincial jealousies and come together as one people, from a simple intellectual and sentimental conviction of the folly of disunion and the advantages of nationhood. The States of America, of Switzerland, of Germany, were drawn together under the shadow of war. Even the Canadian provinces were forced to unite by the neighbour-hood of a great foreign power. But the Australian Commonwealth, the fifth great federation of the world, came into voluntary being through a deep conviction of national unity."

On 22nd December, 1899, the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Mr. Joseph Chamberlain), expressed the hope that a delegation of the federating colonies should visit England, when the Commonwealth Bill was submitted to the Imperial Parliament. It was arranged that this delegation should consist of Mr. Edmund Barton (N.S.W.), Mr. Alfred Deakin (Vic.), Mr. C. C. Kingston (S.A.), Sir P.O. Fysh (Tas.). Mr. S. H. Parker was later appointed a delegate for Western Australia. Modifications having been suggested by the Imperial Crown Law Office, the delegates forwarded to the Secretary of State for the Colonies a memorandum, urging the passage of the Bill in the form affirmed in Australia. While the matter was under consideration, Mr. W. P. Reeves, the Agent-General, was appointed a delegate for New Zealand. The position of Western Australia and New Zealand in connection with the whole matter was well considered, and after a final memorandum (4th May) from the Imperial Government had been replied to by four of the delegates (8th May), the Commonwealth Bill was, on 14th May, introduced in the House of Commons. The second reading was moved on 21st of the month, and the discussion in Committee began on 18th June. The Royal Assent was given on 9th July, 1900.

On 31st July, Western Australia had a referendum on the question of federating, the result being:-

For, 44,800; against, 19,691 ; - majority for, 25,109.

On the 21st August, both Houses of Parliament of Western Australia passed addresses praying that that State might be included as an "original State" of the Commonwealth.

On the 17th September, Her Majesty the late Queen signed the proclamation declaring that on and after the first day of January, 1901, the people of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, Tasmania, and Western Australia, should be united in a Federal Commonwealth, under the name of the Commonwealth of Australia.

This, in the briefest possible outline, is the story of the laying of foundations of Australian nationhood, in the closing years of the 19th Century, and of the consummation of the Constitution under which it now advances.

---

<sup>1</sup>. For a presentation in succinct form of the history of the federal movement, reference may be made to the masterly sketch in Part IV., with the title, "The Federal Movement in Australia," in "The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth," pp. 79-261, by the Hon. Sir John Quick, LL.D.; and Robert Randolph Garran, M.A., C.M.G., Sydney, Melbourne and London, 1901, pp. x1-1008.

Source: Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1901 - 1907 (No.1. - 1908)

---

This page last updated 22 November 2012

© Commonwealth of Australia

All data and other material produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) constitutes Commonwealth copyright administered by the ABS. The ABS reserves the right to set out the terms and conditions for the use of such material. Unless otherwise noted, all material on this website – except the ABS logo, the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, and any material protected by a trade mark – is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 Australia licence